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## Healing through Trance: Case Study of a Kuda Kepang Performance in Batu Pahat, Johor

Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin<sup>a\*</sup>, Solehah Ishak<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*School of Arts, University Science Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.*

<sup>b</sup>*Department of Theatre, Faculty of Film, Theatre and Animation, University Technology MARA, Puncak Perdana campus, 40150, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

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### Abstract

Certain traditional performing arts are used as agents of healing by way of their performance and attendance ritualistic ceremonies. Such performing arts incorporate the trance state as an integral part of their healing ceremony. Usually such trance state forms the climax of the performance as in the Kuda Kepang or Hobby Horse Dance. In Main Putri, another form of therapeutic healing performance, the trance element experienced by the Shaman permeates the performance. This paper examines the trance state in the Kuda Kepang performance and its effects as a healing agent. This non-invasive trance healing performance uses external stimuli such as music, chanting and movements to elevate the participants to a different state of awareness. During this elevated state the healing energy is activated to affect the healing process for psychosomatic maladies as a result of spirit possession or just psychological maladies caused by depression due to social and familial circumstances. This healing performance is also to stimulate an euphoric feeling in the individual participants, to encourage the cleansing of the self and to maintain or rejuvenate the general well-being of society.

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\* Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin. Tel.: +0-426-315-2485.

E-mail address: [muhammednasuriddin@gmail.com](mailto:muhammednasuriddin@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction: Origins and Theories

Kuda Kepang, which originated from Java, is one of the Malay traditional dance theatre forms that incorporate trance in its performance. Brought over to Tanah Melayu (Malaya) by Javanese immigrants it is exclusively performed by members of the Javanese community who have acculturated into the Malay cultural milieu.

Kuda Kepang performance serves both the secular and ritualistic functions. Secular functions include the celebratory aspects of wedding receptions and ceremonies, national holidays, cultural festivals and as a welcoming gesture to honour visiting dignitaries. It is also a communal expression of camaraderie, an event organized by the village for the secular and spiritual consumption of the villagers. It binds the members of the community physically, spiritually and mystically.

In the old days, the Kuda Kepang served its ritualistic function when it was performed to cleanse the village of evil spirits. It is an effort to engage the spirits, both malevolent and benevolent, to acknowledge their presence in an attempt to rationalize the interaction of the real and the nether existence. Also it is to exhibit the prowess of the shaman to interact with a different level of mystical existence.

When performing for secular functions the dance is performed as entertainment focusing on its aesthetic aspects, mainly the dance movements, choreography and music. But when performing as a ritual for thanksgiving or to exorcise evil spirits or negative energy from the village, the dance involves the invocation of spirits from the nether world, thus focusing on its mystical and metaphysical aspects. As such the trance aspect of the dance becomes the integral focal point and core element of the performance.

### 1.1. Trance

Trance is an altered state of awareness which can be induced by invasive or non-invasive elements in a clinically controlled environment such as hospitals and other relevant medical facilities or in an anthropological setting through the process of traditional healing that may or may not involve the vehicle of performance.

Psychotropic or psychogenic drugs can be used to induce the trance state. This is safe in a controlled clinical situation. But the abuse of such drugs or other illegal agents to induce a state of euphoria/partial trance can be dangerous.

But in a performance, a trance state is induced by non-invasive stimuli such as sounds (music and chanting), olfactory stimulus (smell) or movements as in the Turkish whirling Dervish dance or in a combination of these three elements.

There are two types of trance state in a performance, namely possession trance and reduction of consciousness trance. Possession trance is defined as when a person is possessed by an external entity, force or energy commonly referred to as spirits. Traditional practitioners believe that these spirits exist in a different but parallel dimension to ours. In animistic belief, the spirit world forms an integral part of the devotees livelihood for they serve as a reference and guide posts for the life process of rite de passage, agricultural and other economic activities as well as for healing purposes.

They serve as a psychological security for the animistic believers who ascribe to them all manners of ailments as well as the occurrences of natural phenomena. For these spirits are believed to aid in alleviating various physical and spiritual and cerebral sufferings and they are responsible for one's overall well being.

The second type of trance is the reduction of consciousness trance, in which part or parts of the person's anatomy are disassociated from the overall physical self as in the *Dabus* dance where the dancers pierce their arms with sharp iron rods without feeling any pain.<sup>†</sup>

Elaborate rituals encased as performances are presented to invoke these spirits. At the same time these performances serve as entertainment for the community and as a vehicle for continuing local tradition—practices and beliefs, lore and legends.

## 2. Methodology

For this case study, we selected a village from Parit Nipah Darat in Batu Pahat centered on the Cultural Group, Kumpulan Setia Budi headed by Mr Miskon Bin Karim, a man in his 60s. His house and compound has been turned into a cultural complex housing a gamelan musical workshop, a rehearsal and performance area in the central compound and a covered raised stage for dance and modern music performances.

It was in the compound of his house that a Kuda Kepang and Isim performance was held on the night of 7th. April 2013, after the esha prayers, around 9. pm. The troupe consisted of the following performers.

1. Ten male dancers and a leader called Danyang.
2. Musical ensemble comprising of a pair of angklong bamboo chimes, a canang (a pair of twin knobbed gongs), a double face barrel-drum and a jidor (a smaller cylindrical drum).
3. The bomoh or shaman who sees to the well being of the performers and audience. He controls the dancers in a trance and releases the spirit at the end of the performance.
4. Offerings consisting of jasmine flowers (bunga kenaga), a bunch of bananas, consecrated waters and a censor for the burning of benzoin (kemeyan).
5. Ten to twelve hobby horses (Kuda kepong) one for each dancer and some to spare. The traditional hobbyhorse is made using bamboo frame while the body and head are made from woven bamboo strips. Modern hobbyhorses are also made from cardboard and even plastic.
6. Before the beginning of the performance, the Bomoh or Shaman recites the prayers over the hobbyhorse figures as he smokes them in the benzoin smoke oozing from the censor to invoke the spirits to possess the dancers and elevate them into the trance state.

When this ritual is completed, each dancer takes a hobbyhorse figure and arranges himself with the others in a linear formation. They dance, going through various linear, diagonal and circular formations using walking, skipping and trotting movements,

The dancers who have ascended into the trance state will continue roaming around the performance area in a circular anticlockwise motion within the area demarcated by the Shaman. They will not wander beyond the delineated space except when they leave the trance state. The other dancers not in a trance state will leave the performance area and sit at its perimeter.

The dancers in this possession trance have a glazed look—looking slightly upwards as they move to the rhythm of the drums. At this juncture some members of the audience who are easily incited as a result of their experience of performing the Kuda Kepang may also go into trance.

The trance state is an elevated state of awareness. It is like moving into another dimension of existence, which evokes a euphoric feeling, just like those taking psychotropic drugs, which gives one a feeling of high. It can be addictive. Once a dancer has experienced the trance state and its euphoric feeling, he craves for more and periodically searched out Kuda Kepang performances to be drawn into the trance state.

What happens to the dancer when he goes into trance? What causes him to be elevated into a different level of awareness? From the traditional perspective, spirits invoked by the music, offerings and the prayers possess him and control all his actions. He is thus able to execute extraordinary, and sometimes almost supernatural physical actions.

## 3. Findings

In Kuda Kepang, the dancers experience ecstatic experiences where they seem to merge with the universe created by their cosmological beliefs. This is the traditional rationale of such incidents.

But the scientific explanation may not involve spirits but more of the fervent belief that initiates the autosuggestion mechanism to lift oneself onto a different level of awareness. It is the mind that brings about this perception of a different reality. To the scientists the spirit world is a figment of ones imagination. It is mainly a biological rather than a spiritual reaction.

In scientific parlance, the trance state is an autogenic reaction induced by external stimuli that acts on the brain that causes the release of chemicals and electrical impulses, elevating a person onto a hallucinogenic state. In this state the brain may cause the release of adrenalin that may allow a person to perform feats that defy normal physical constraints.

Among such stimuli are sonic orders (sounds), pharmacological elements (hallucinogenic agents such as drugs--marijuana, cocaine, etc) that act directly on the brain causing behavioral and emotional change. The brain is regarded as the key to solving this mystery. But actually, besides the brain, there is the mind that also affects human behavior.

But scientists are of the view that electrical and electro-chemical impulses in the brain account for all of our thoughts patterns and mental experiences and that they are the result of the behaviour of our nerve cells and associated molecules.

In the trance state, time, space and energy are different from the real world. The spatial temporal configuration may not follow a linear trajectory as regards to energetic propulsion (movements). In the normal world, the activation of energy, which usually results in propulsion, involves spatial temporal relationships. Energy is represented by a body/mass moving in space in a linear temporal trajectory.

It takes time for a body or mass to move through space. Its speed is dependent on the amount of energy expended and the resistance of the space. These two variables will determine the time taken for a mass to move from designated points.

In a trance, this temporal spatial/energy relationship is altered. Time is slowed and at times suspended; space is non-committal, it is flux. It has no reference point, but the energy flows carrying the mass/body in suspended animation—a floating rising feeling. In this situation the dancer coasts along with the energy flowing smoothly without any expectations of dead reckoning (moving from one point to another). Space is spiral and time is cyclical.

There are occasions during the trance state when the energy surges, enabling the dancers to execute strong and even wild movements. In special cases the energy surge is so powerful that it enables the dancers to execute extraordinary physical action such as jumping up to the roof or galloping like a horse. In other instances, dancers in a trance, execute mysterious actions like munching broken glass or razor blades, husking a coconut with his teeth. In such cases the physical energy has translated into spiritual energy; the mind takes over matter.

The dancers in a trance will dance until the Shaman stops them. They have no volition of their own for they are possessed by the spirits. Only the Shaman can exorcise the spirits from the dancers. He calls the dancer to come to him by sounding the whip and whistling. The dancer approaches the shaman and stops in front of him. With the help of a handler, he grabs the dancer from behind around the waist. He presses his thumb, at the dancer's navel and recites a prayer to release the spirits. As the spirit leaves the dancer, he momentarily collapses before getting up and running to the back of the performance area. He stops when he regains his conscious self.

In cases where the spirit is reluctant to leave the body, the Bomoh or Shaman with the help of a handler first coaxes it by sounding the whip several times, holding and releasing the dancer momentarily. In the event that it is adamant, the Shaman will forcibly exorcise the spirit by holding the dancer tightly from the back and pressing his thumb deep into the dancer's navel as he recites a prayer. By the third attempt, the spirit is successively exorcised.

But in some cases the just recovered dancers may experience a relapse and are repossessed by the spirits, who although they have left the body are still hovering around the performance area. They may repossess the dancers if the dancers are in a transient state, that is, the state in which the dancers descend from the trance to the ecstatic state, during which he is still susceptible to be repossessed as he has not regained fully his psychic self and emplaced his critical faculties.

Other instances, which encourage repossession, is when the dancers still yearns the euphoric experience of the trance state and awaits to be embraced by the spirits. The rational mind is still in limbo and the self has not anchored to the reality of the material world. It is still in the cosmological realm of ecstatic experience within the context of a virtual reality where mass and body are not innate and where the spatial—temporal and energy configuration are malleable and do not submit to normal physical laws.

From the scientific point of view those who go into a trance ascend it through autosuggestion. The brain is credited with stimulating such experiences through the intervention of sonic, olfactory and kinetic energy. It is self-stimulated. But recent thinking credits such experiences to the self, which involves the intangible mind and the soul. For it goes beyond the cerebral functions of the brain and the mental experiences engineered by the brain.

Here the mind, the brain and the self come into play; it is an amalgamation of the material bodies and the immaterial minds.

#### 4. Conclusion

We find that in Kuda Kepang the healing is about communal psychic therapy rather than the healing of individual illness. This is the healing of the angin rather than any physiological or psychosomatic illness. In a close-knit kampung or village, the angin binds the members of the community, especially when they are from a specific ethnic group, in this case Javanese. There is a common psychic that identifies the community besides the individual ones that are linked to the communal one. The healing is the redressing of the psychic imbalance to induce relaxation. This could also be autogenic therapy in which the participants are in self-induced relaxation.

This common psychic is usually expressed as tradition, based on norms, mores and values that are heeded and practiced by the community. Such compendium of lifestyles and belief guide the community through the various trains of physical and spiritual existence. Thus, the communal ethos is expressed through the visual and performing arts, which when performed or exhibited invigorates the psychic energy of the individual members of the community while enhancing their ties with the other members of the community. Thus healing is more of a communal therapy rather than the healing of individual psychosomatic or psychological maladies.

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